

Scenario: Railroad

Introduction

The railroad scenario explores locations for visitor facilities that would service travelers along a 90-mile railroad corridor between the George Parks Highway just north of Healy and the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area. In order to explore locations for visitor facilities along a railroad corridor, some working assumptions were developed.

Working Assumptions

1. A railroad would require fewer visitor facility locations than a road, but the individual “footprint” of the visitor facilities for a railroad, at both the beginning and the terminus of the railroad, would be greater than those for a road.
2. The Stampede Road would continue to be maintained to Eight Mile Lake.
3. Although a north access railroad would likely follow a route other than the Stampede Road alignment, the Stampede Mine area and other locations identified in the study could serve as potential destinations along a railroad transportation corridor.
4. The existing park road would continue to operate in the same manner as it does today, keeping with the same management guidelines and vehicle use limits. This assumption is based on the desire to preserve the road character and the unique visitor experience that the road currently provides.
5. Rail service and the existing bus system (shuttle and tours) could offer a combined train-bus trip for visitors. Since the majority of today’s bus traffic turns around at the Eielson Visitor Center, the environmental consequences of increased bus traffic on the existing park road between Eielson and Wonder Lake/Kantishna would need to be analyzed.
6. The terminus for a railroad would be in the vicinity of the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area.
7. An interchange facility at the terminus of the railroad would facilitate passenger transfers from bus travel to train travel, and vice versa.
8. A railroad to the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area would be a single rail system with the potential for operating more than one train per day. Sidings (short stretches of railroad track used to enable trains on the same line to pass) would be located at intervals along the railroad route to allow for trains to pass one another along the single track.
9. A railroad system could establish a system similar to the existing visitor transportation system, providing both tour and shuttle services for passengers. A “whistle stop” type of system could be established to allow hikers and backpackers the opportunity to get on and off the train at established locations along the railroad corridor.

10. The rail system would be capable of transporting up to 700 people per train.
11. The operation and maintenance of a railroad would offer opportunities for private-public partnerships.
12. Any increased demand for overnight lodging in Healy would be provided by local private businesses.
13. Both Federal and State agencies would seek partnerships with the private sector to provide services to the public, such as in the operation and maintenance of campgrounds.
14. Increased visitor access to Wonder Lake and Kantishna would result in a higher demand and/or need for additional overnight facilities (i.e., campground, hostel, cabins).
15. Coordination would be needed between the existing bus reservation/ticketing system and a train reservation system.

Locations and Types of Visitor Facilities along a Railroad

The locations, and their associated visitor facilities, along a 90-mile railroad corridor are discussed below.

Location 1 – George Parks Highway

A new 90-mile railroad corridor to the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area would require some type of visitor information center to orient people to the train trip and sell tickets. Similar to the road scenario, a visitor center/train depot could be located near the intersection of the George Parks Highway and the Stampede Road to welcome visitors and provide information. The visitor center could issue backcountry permits and make reservations. Ample overnight parking for automobiles, RVs and buses would be provided. A location along the George Parks Highway would provide easy access for visitors traveling from the north or the south, and would accommodate bus tours. An interchange with the current Alaska Railroad could be considered for this scenario. Visitor facilities along the George Parks Highway could include:

- Visitor Information/Welcome Center/Train Depot
- Defined parking area for automobiles, RVs and buses
- Developed campground for tent and RV campers
- Cultural and natural interpretation
- Hiking trails
- Picnic tables and shelter

Location 2 – Eight Mile Lake

Eight Mile Lake marks the end of the maintained portion of today's Stampede Road and currently serves as an undeveloped parking area/trailhead and dispersed camping location. This location could be the first train stop for travelers departing from the George Parks Highway. Since Eight Mile Lake would still be accessible via the Stampede Road, visitor facilities could be similar to those considered for the road scenario and include:

- Defined parking area for automobiles, RVs and buses

- Developed campground accommodating tent and RV campers
- Dispersed campsites
- Restroom facilities
- Trailhead for a trail system:
- Wayside
- Interpretive signing/wildlife viewing
- Picnic tables and/or shelter
- Lake access
- Public use cabins/hut-to-hut system

Communication and coordination with nearby landowners would be necessary prior to any future improvement or development at Eight Mile Lake.

Location 3 – Savage/Teklanika Rivers

Visitor facilities at the Savage and Teklanika Rivers, if any, would be fewer than those for a road corridor. This area could be a train stop for travelers. No major visitor facilities are envisioned at this location under this scenario, however, a trail system could be considered.

Location 4 – Teklanika-Sushana Divide

A train stop at this location could provide visitors with an opportunity to enjoy the view of Mount McKinley, approximately 80 miles southwest, and connect to a state trail system.

Location 5 – Sushana River

The Sushana River location would be the farthest west location for facility development on state land. This location provides an opportunity to provide a remote, overnight experience for travelers. Visitor facilities serving train travelers at this location could include:

- Dispersed campsites, a developed campground, public use cabins, or a lodge
- Restroom facilities
- A train stop allowing travelers the opportunity to recreate in the area:
 - destination trail to “the bus”
 - destination or loop trail to the two remote lakes (Sushana Lakes) on state land
- Interpretive signing
- Picnic tables and/or shelter

Location 6 – Toklat-East Fork

Location 6 is not applicable to the railroad scenario. Visitor facility development, including trails, would be consistent with the Denali Backcountry Management Plan.

Location 7 – Toklat-Clearwater Fork

Location 7 is not applicable to the railroad scenario. Visitor facility development, including trails, would be consistent with the Denali Backcountry Management Plan.

Location 8 – Stampede Mine

The historic Stampede Mine would offer the visitor a unique, interpretive stop along the railroad corridor and, therefore, a train stop could be located near the Stampede Mine. Similar to the road scenario, visitor facilities could highlight the unique qualities and contributions of the Stampede

Mine as it pertains to Alaska's mining history. The Stampede Mine airstrip would continue to be open to the public and may require improvements. The following types of visitor facilities could be considered:

- Dispersed campsites or a small, developed campground
- Restroom facilities
- Trail to the Stampede Mine that connects to an interpretive trail through the historic mine site
- Interpretive signing
- Picnic tables and/or shelter
- Small information/welcome center
- Airstrip-associated facilities, such as an information kiosk and interpretive signing
- A small administrative facility (i.e., a ranger cabin) could also be considered

Location 9 – Myrtle-Willow Divide

A spectacular view of Mount McKinley occurs at Myrtle-Willow Divide. If the train did not cross the divide at this location, a trail to the Myrtle-Willow Divide's mountain vista (or a similar vista) could be developed. The train could stop at a trailhead and allow visitors an opportunity to disembark and hike to this location. Visitor facilities at this scenic viewpoint could include:

- Restroom facilities
- Trailhead and trail between the railroad stop and the mountain vista
- A trail to Kantishna
- Interpretive signs
- Viewing platform

Location 10 – Kantishna/Wonder Lake

The Kantishna/Wonder Lake area would be the terminus for a railroad. With the capacity of up to 700 passengers per train, the existing facilities would not meet the needs of the increased number of visitors. A system would need to be established to coordinate the transfer of travelers from the bus system to the train, and vice versa. This "interchange facility" could incorporate a small visitor center to orient visitors and provide information and interpretive programs.

Additional overnight facilities would likely be necessary to meet the increased demand from the train travelers. Some potential options for additional overnight accommodations include: developing a new campground, providing railcar lodging by parking "sleepers" throughout the season at the end of the railroad tracks, or adding a hostel or cabins. The need to provide for increased visitors could also lead to opportunities for private development or expansion of existing accommodations in Kantishna.

Kantishna is comprised of numerous historic mine sites and interesting natural features, such as the Quigly Cabin, Little Annie Mine and Wickersham Dome. A trail system stemming from the terminus of a railroad could connect to these and other interesting sites in and around Kantishna. The Fannie Quigley cabin has been restored by the National Park Service and could be the starting point for a Kantishna interpretive/historic trail system.

Wonder Lake is located approximately five miles from Kantishna and, on a clear day, offers a spectacular view of Mount McKinley. The existing facilities at Wonder Lake include a Ranger

Station that serves as a small visitor information center, a 28-site campground for tent campers only (no private vehicle access), and a trail system. A railroad could result in the expansion of existing facilities (i.e., additional campsites, improved welcome center) and some new development (i.e., additional restroom facilities) to meet the needs of the increased number of visitors.

Visitor facilities at the terminus of a 90-mile railroad could include:

- An interchange facility to facilitate passenger transfers from bus travel to train travel, and vice versa
- Defined parking area for buses to facilitate passenger transfers
- Campground and/or overnight lodging facilities
- Additional restroom facilities
- Trail system connecting to existing trails at Wonder Lake and Kantishna
- Interpretive signing
- Picnic tables and/or shelter
- Expanded Visitor Information Center
- Restaurant/Food Service Facility

Note: This study does not assess the cumulative effects of a railroad proposal; however, it is important to note that the Kantishna/Wonder Lake area presently offers a remote experience that would be changed by a railroad and its associated increase in visitors. An analysis would be necessary to assess the costs and benefits of changing the remote character and experience that is currently sought at Kantishna and Wonder Lake.

Refer to appendix C for a discussion of additional visitor facility factors, such as costs and design considerations.